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CRIME, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE LAW



TRAUMA
BONDING AND
INTERPERSONAL
CRIMES

JOAN A. REID

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Trauma Bonding and Interpersonal Crimes

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Foreword

Trauma Bonding and Interpersonal Crimes is an excellent primer on the social and psychological dynamics involved in trauma bonding for students, researchers, and professionals working in various organizational sectors. Joan Reid provides accessible, easy-to-read material that is simultaneously well researched and astutely analyzed. Within the various academic disciplines that include victimology (e.g., criminology, psychology, social work, sociology, and public health), the concept of trauma bonding and its various labels is debated and the available research is limited. This book examines these debates and limitations as well as the meaning and impact of the various terms and labels used to describe trauma bonding. Reid synthesizes traditionally separate areas of victimization to provide a holistic view of the subject. This book is of central importance to understand the concept of trauma bonding as well as the consequences of the ways trauma bonding is framed in the public discourse and in professional sectors.

Scholars, students, and professionals who work with survivors of human trafficking, intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, and more will find a comprehensive volume synthesizing the extant literature exploring trauma bonding. The book not only describes the research in this area but also focuses on interventions. Case studies are used to exemplify dynamics of trauma bonding, facilitating related understanding of the reader. Case studies are combined with research data to provide individual examples as well as an evidence-based approach to the subject.

As a researcher of sex trafficking and the practices used by professionals to respond to it, the subject of trauma bonding often manifests among participants in my community-based research. Anti-trafficking professionals struggle with adolescents, typically 15–17-year-olds, who are “rescued” and then run away as soon as they can to return to their trafficker. Adults as well as adolescents who are involved in romantic relationships with a trafficker experience difficulty leaving the trafficking situation. Reid speaks to these dynamics of re-trafficking and barriers to leaving through the lens of trauma bonding, which is important for any anti-trafficking professional to understand in order to avoid victim blaming and problematic responses.

As a professor teaching undergraduate and graduate courses exploring dynamics of both sex trafficking and intimate partner violence, I am pleased to have this book as a resource for my classes. The chapters are well written and easy to understand, and the critical thinking questions and explanation of key terms and concepts are particularly useful. Each chapter also highlights limitations to existing research and provides recommendations for further research. The book starts with chapters focused on theory and research, allowing students to see the utility and interaction of theory and research, which sets the stage for subsequent topic-based chapters. Chapters examining interventions in social services and law enforcement then serve as a practical base for professionals, and the book closes with directions for the future. This book will be of value to any professional who works with survivors of crimes involving trauma bonding.

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Preface

Almost two decades ago, while attending my very first conference on human trafficking, I met the most intriguing academic. Spellbound by the recounting of his perilous fieldwork exposing the corruption facilitating child trafficking, I purposed to do more to end exploitation of children. During my short conversation with this researcher, I asked him: “What is needed? What can I do to stop this?” Without hesitating for a second, his immediate response was: “Figure out *trauma bonding*.” He continued by saying that trauma bonding psychologically traps and keeps individuals in toxic cycles of exploitation. This book is a byproduct of that conversation.

The book is a collection of research and real-life reports on trauma bonding in many contexts of interpersonal violence from child sexual abuse to human trafficking. As a mental health counselor, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of interpersonal violence and the effect of trauma bonds. To all who have shared painful life experiences and soul-crushing emotions, I am grateful to you for sharing your stories of terror and survival with me. Most poignantly, I remember a survivor of intimate partner violence, who had long escaped her life-threatening circumstances, sobbing and telling me: “I’ve never stopped loving him even though I know without a doubt he would have eventually killed me.” I hope that this book truly testifies to your courage and strength to survive terror that most of us can barely imagine.

For my fellow researchers, my primary objective for writing this book is to provide a starting point for your research and scholarly work on trauma bonding. There are many more books and research articles to be written on this topic by you. Please use this book as a tool to guide your research as you work to advance our understanding of trauma bonding.

—Joan A. Reid
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, FL, USA
September 2024

About the Author

Joan A. Reid, Ph.D., LMHC is the Director of the University of South Florida Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Risk to Resilience Research Lab and Professor of Criminology. Dr. Reid has authored over 70 publications chiefly focused on sex trafficking of girls and boys in the United States. The impact of her research is extensive, appearing as a citing authority in human trafficking cases in various State Supreme Courts and amicus brief for the U.S. Supreme Court case *Jane Doe et al. vs. Backpage et al.* U.S. 16-276 (2016). As a licensed mental health counselor, Dr. Reid provides psychotherapy to rape, sexual abuse, and sex trafficking survivors. Dr. Reid received her MA in rehabilitation and mental health counseling and PhD in criminology from the University of South Florida.

Notes on Contributors

Klejdis Bilali, MA, is a doctoral student in the Department of Criminology at the University of South Florida, Tampa; a graduate research assistant of the USF Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Risk to Resilience Research Lab; and a registered mental health counseling intern. She completed her MA in clinical psychology at the University of Central Florida, where she facilitated trauma-focused psychotherapy with sex trafficked, child welfare-involved youth. Her primary clinical and research interests revolve around interpersonal trauma, namely exploring predictors and outcomes of childhood maltreatment, family violence, and human trafficking and evaluating victimization prevention efforts.

Sarah M. Gardy, MA, is a graduate student in the Cognitive Behavioral Psychology program at the University of Florida. She completed her MA in psychological sciences at the University of South Florida while working in the USF Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Risk to Resilience Lab under Dr. Joan Reid. She is interested in the psychophysiological aspects of trauma and the human brain, focusing on how traumatic experiences impact emotional processing and fear learning.

Emily D. Walker, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Criminology at the University of South Florida, Tampa, and a graduate research assistant in the USF Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Risk to Resilience Lab. Her primary research interests center around the psychological impact of trauma, with a focus on human trafficking risk and various forms of interpersonal violence, vulnerabilities of minority and marginalized populations, and evaluation of intervention programs related to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

1

Introduction to Trauma Bonding

Joan A. Reid

Book Overview

Trauma bonding is a paradoxical, psychological response that is often inadequately measured by researchers and misunderstood by the public. At the most basic level, trauma bonding is one of many labels that has been assigned to the phenomenon of victims developing emotional attachments to their abusers or captors. Consequences of trauma bonding are endured by individuals, and at times by their families and friends, because those who perpetrate interpersonal crimes create conditions ripe for the formation of a trauma bond. Trauma bonding allows perpetrators of interpersonal crimes to further exploit and take advantage of crime victims. From children who are psychologically attached to a sex offender and therefore do not disclose the enduring of daily molestation (Summit, 1983) to youth who are conscripted in criminal enterprises as drug mules or sex-trafficking victims (Windle et al., 2020), trauma bonding exacerbates and extends the devastating consequences of interpersonal trauma and violence.

Despite repeated observations of trauma bonding affecting victims of interpersonal crimes, little is known about its formation or persistence, and even less is known about positive resolution in survivors. The scope of this book encompasses a review of the existing theoretical conceptualizations and research findings on trauma bonding in relation to various forms of interpersonal crimes, including human trafficking, intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, cults, kidnapping, gangs, and terrorism. Each chapter highlights the complexities of intervention and treatment for survivors, first responders, and clinicians. The chapters feature case studies, voices of survivors, and insights from practitioners on the frontlines to provide the reader with a blending of the experience of trauma bonding in real life with well-researched information. Critical concerns regarding gaps in research focused on trauma bonding as well as guidance regarding potential avenues for the integration of theory and research are addressed. Lastly, implications for policies related to trauma bonding within the field of interpersonal violence are considered throughout the book.

A Survivor's Voice

My final abuser was an intimate partner. He started his manipulation of me by accepting my kids as his own and pretending to be a good father. His main way of controlling me was to use my children. He fed into my need for a family and pretended to be one with me by going so far as to have my kids call him dad. I wanted a family more than anything. I wanted to do better for my children than what had been done to me. And I knew that I didn't know what a "normal" family looked like. So anything he told me about how a "good mom" behaves, I believed because his family seemed so normal. He convinced me that we were a family, albeit an isolated one. It was just us. He kept us away from others who may have seen what was happening by convincing me that we were above those other people. Our family was special. He convinced me that the acts he made me commit were for my children. He convinced me that I was taking care of my children by bringing in the money and protecting the children by keeping everything a secret and pretending to be a stay at home mom. He convinced me that everything I was doing was for the family. He convinced me that I was actually in control of the situation because I could pick the "dates." He would send me out to make money as a prostitute to finance our lives, but then he would control what I wore around town so that I didn't "look like a slut." His emotions were all over the place.

One day, he would be kind to me and loving and talking about the future. The next, he was calling me names, putting his hands on me, and sleeping with other girls. And that cycle of thinking I finally had everything I had ever wanted and then wishing he would come back to that happy place is what kept me trapped. He didn't have to hurt me physically anymore. The words he used and his withdrawal of affection were enough to keep me actually trying to stay with him, to work it out with him, to help him. His control of me was complete. I would do anything to have my family.

Then, after many years of enduring this abuse, I left. I had enough support so that I could leave. I had support to find an apartment and enroll in college. But then, that support dwindled. I looked like I was doing fine outwardly because I could fake it so well. I had not yet learned about trauma bonds and the hold my abuser would have on me even after I had left him. He knew. He kept planting seeds of doubt in my mind about my new life. Every phone call and every visit, he would remind me that he was a part of the family. That I was stopping him from seeing the kids. That anytime he suffered, those kids suffered. He moved in with me several times because he "needed" a place to go, and I was a "bitch" if I wouldn't help him. He "borrowed" money from me (or had me steal it for him when I didn't have any) because of some "need" that arose or bill that was due, and I had to help him because I was the person who had promised to be there forever and then left. He used the "a good mom would..." tactic that had worked to keep me for so long. He used me being a Christian against me. What would Jesus do? He would help his fellow man, so I am not a good Christian if I turn him away. He would tell me how much he loved me and had changed or wanted to change or was going to change. Sometimes I would believe him and try again, and sometimes I would just give in to his demands because it was easier than the fight.

And, there's the clincher. It may take us years to recognize the control tactics our abusers used. It will also take us years to undo the negative self-talk they shoved into our brains for us to ruminate. Often, when we leave the abusive situation, people expect that to be the end of the abuse. But, as many of us survivors of abuse know, that is when it really amps up. Our abuser is in a panic because he/she has lost his/her object of aggression. That abuser will pull out all of the stops to bring us back to the fold. And for a person like me who had been searching for someone or something to fill a void, all of those sweet promises seem to fit that void well.

It took years of dedicated effort to undo the voices he put in my head. And during that time in which I was unlearning abuse, I had to question everyone and everything. I felt if he had tricked me so easily, then others could as well. I no longer trusted my own brain to make safe choices. I second guessed everyone's motives. I second guessed my own thoughts and my own feelings. I had always considered myself smart and strong. To learn that I had been tricked for so long made me feel even more vulnerable. I had to learn how to rewrite the lies he told me about myself. I had to learn how to trust my brain again. And I had to learn how to have a safe relationship with a former abuser because, after all, we are a family.

Marianne Thomas, PhD
 Founder
 My Name My Voice

KEY TERMS

Bond: A bond is a connection. Bonds may be of a special mutual emotional nature, such as a romantic attachment, or they may be based on other emotions (e.g., fear, such as seen in the bond between the captor and the captive).

Bonding: Any activity, action, condition, or behavior that helps establish or maintain a connection.

Brainwashing: The term closely related to trauma bonding is often used in conjunction with prisoners of war (POWs) and cult members. Brainwashing has been defined as “the deliberate creation of culture shock through isolation, alienation, and intimidation in order to weaken a person’s ego strengths” (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998, p. 863). All individuals are thought to be susceptible to brainwashing if the exposure is long enough, they are alone and without support, and have no hope of escaping (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998, p. 863).

Hostage Captor Effect: A term used by law enforcement professionals and criminal justice researchers to identify the phenomenon of trauma bonding in the context of hostage taking.

Stockholm Syndrome: The most recognized and colloquial term related to this phenomenon of bonding with an abuser. The term was first used following a bank robbery that evolved into a hostage situation in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973. During the prolonged event, the captives acquired positive attachments to their captors, later posting bail for them, with some captives even expressing a desire to marry their captors (Dutton & Painter, 1981). The term

Stockholm syndrome is generally used to describe attachments developing between captors and captives during kidnapping or hostage events.

Trauma Bonding: A term used by Dutton and Painter (1981) as a descriptive label for the development of a psychological connection between an abuser and the abused and is primarily used in the context of intimate partner violence.

Trauma-Coerced Attachment: A more recently developed label to describe the attachment process within the relationship dynamics of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2019). Sanchez et al. (2019) theorized that trauma bonding in CSEC is “uni-directional” rather than bidirectional, with the exploiter terrorizing the victim for the purposes of obtaining profit without a reciprocal emotional connection with the victim (Sanchez et al., 2019).

Terminology and Contexts

The phenomenon of victims developing emotional attachments to their abusers or captors has been observed in situations involving intimate partner violence, child abuse, hostage taking, human trafficking, and cults. While the circumstances may differ in each context, there is significant overlap in both the conditions that drive a trauma bond and in the response of those experiencing a trauma bond. Historically, there have been an array of terms used to label the complex and paradoxical attachment that often forms between the victim and the victimizer to abet victim survival and harm avoidance (Casassa et al., 2022; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020, 2023; Reid et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2019). These labels (e.g., brainwashing and Stockholm syndrome) are discussed in length in the chapters that cover the respective forms of interpersonal violence in which these labels for trauma bonding are used. Several of the most recognized labels for trauma bonding are noted among the key terms in this chapter.

No label or terminology used for trauma bonding is without its proponents or detractors as the phenomenon itself is poorly researched and often misunderstood by the public. Terms and labels are powerful components in the construction of knowledge within a society. In particular, labels used in the media impact public discourse (Goddard et al., 2005). Moreover, values and social capital can be associated with particular words, thereby influencing public policies (Goddard et al., 2005). One concern regarding certain labels associated with trauma bonding is that the labels themselves could cast blame on victims for the violence and abuse committed against them due to the misguided notion that victims of interpersonal violence are somehow colluding with the abuser. In order to counter misguided victim blaming, this book aims to bring a greater understanding of trauma bonding in order to reduce victim blaming and misappropriation of blame from the abuser to the victim. Language and terminology cannot be allowed to transform the devastating consequences of interpersonal trauma into a discourse of victim blaming, or to insinuate victim-and-offender complicity, nor to allow the criminal behavior of abusers to be disguised. The focus of blame should clearly be on the abuse and the abuser. The alternative grants the abuser absolution.